

Kasperson and Kasperson, 2001: Some risks are transboundary—they cross state lines. Identifying these risks leads to better identification of intervention strategies. Borders can attract more hazardous facilities because of the ability to pass some risk along to another party, to take advantage of less strict regulations or because these areas receive little political attention. The OECD has identified two principle classes of transboundary pollution: upstream-downstream pollution and reciprocal pollution. Transboundary risks can be identified as those that “arise when human activities in one or more nation-states threaten current or future environmental quality, human health, or well-being in at least one other nation-state.” The authors classify risk into four categories: border-impact risks, point-source transboundary risks, structural/policy transboundary risks and global environmental risks. People (or social groups, institutions, etc.) act as amplification stations, increasing or decreasing risk messages.

Lofstedt, 1996: Old school of thought is that experts and policy makers need to convince the public of the validity of their assessment of risk, but this has been countered with the idea that experts also have biases that color their risk perceptions, as well as different values and priorities. Instead of engaging the public in discussions of the safety and future of the Barseback nuclear plant, the Swedish government and the company that owned the plant, Sydkraft, tried to persuade the Danes that the plant was safe. However, although the Swedish people trusted the government, the Danes had much less trust, felt out of control, felt it was an unfamiliar threat and thought Sydkraft acted arrogantly. Finally, there was some social amplification of risk, where political issues are brought into the debate. Engaging the public in dialogue would mitigate some of these issues and lead to greater acceptance on all sides.

Lofstedt and Jankauskas, 2001: The Swedish government gave money to Lithuania to improve the safety of a nuclear power plant that is about 600 miles from Sweden’s coast. This raises issues over who should pay for risk mitigation—the perpetrators or the victims? In this case, the Swedes as “victims” were paying. The results of this study showed that the public in both countries support the aid and express concerns over environmental problems, although both are especially concerned over local environmental issues. There are some problems associated with the giving of this aid, particularly the resentment that can and has come from an outside government playing such a strong role in the operation of the plant.

Slovak, 1987: The field of risk assessment identifies, characterizes and quantifies risk, but citizens more commonly use “intuitive risk judgments,” or risk perceptions, in determining risk.

Reactions: Slovak comments that Americans perceive that risks are increasing, while professional risk assessors (“experts”) would say that they are decreasing. However, having just come off of a couple of lectures discussing climate change, it does seem that these types of risks are increasing. It certainly increases that perception of risk (to use Lofstedt’s model) that so much of the change associated with global warming and related issues feels unfamiliar and unknowable, and that we hear such mixed messages that it is difficult to know who to trust. Regardless, I think it is human nature to concentrate on new risks or unsolved risks, while forgetting about risks that took place in the past but that we no longer face. Risk is an extremely subjective idea, not only to the psychological factors that Slovak mentioned but also to an individual’s own risk profile, or willingness to take on risk. Because of this, and because of people’s own biases, there is no “true” perception of risk. The value judgments of experts should not be given priority over those of lay people.