

A meta-theory of risk: Risk as reflexive, social learning

There are diverse views and interpretations of risk. In the literature, risk is often regarded as “analysis”, “social constructs”, “feelings”, “discourse” and so forth. Limited studies were devoted to exploring the diversification of the meanings and there is a lack of (meta-) risk theory which explains their co-existence. This paper depicts the development of a risk research to fill these intellectual gaps and reports the current findings for discussions.

The research found that risk exists only by virtue of the knowledge people have of it. This knowledge (known as risk knowledge) encompasses the scientific knowledge (e.g. risk analysis or estimation) and social knowledge (e.g. people’s perception, social/cultural norms, gut feelings). The intrinsic duality of the risk knowledge explains the diversification and co-existence of risk definitions in the literature. Risk is dynamic. People’s perception of risk issue (e.g. genetic modified food/crops, Volatile Organic Compounds in paints) changes over time and across different spatio-cultural dimensions, depending on the development and acquisition of risk knowledge via social learning processes. A meta-theory of risk was developed and a number of essential elements of the theory were identified. Implications to the existing risk theories, methods and tools, and risk management were given for further discussion.

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