

Risk perception and misperception of disasters

—the case of 'earthquake orphans'

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The issue of “disaster orphans” tends to gain extremely high profile during the early stages of any large-scale disasters. Media reports, relief and public mobilization are all deeply colored by the expectation that large number of orphans will need to be protected and adopted. In reality, the expected numbers are proven to have surpassed the actual numbers by several orders of magnitude. Using the publicly available information on orphans caused by the recent Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan province in China, this paper attempts to account for this extremely large gap between the public perception of earthquake orphans and reality. The paper tries to posit the several ways in which social knowledge of risk is created and maintained by various actors (the general public, internet communities, NGO’s, government institutions and in particular the media), and their reactions when these perception are challenged by actual data. The paper argues that the inflated perception of risk is not just the result of poor information, but of an informal cultural model of disaster outcomes supported by various processes of information sharing and by the interests and values of various actors involved. We suggest that this perception of orphans negatively affects the distribution of resources during the relief effort. And we contrast the risk “overshoot” on orphans with the equally marked “undershoot” of the risk perception of children separated with families during the early stages of disaster relief.