



Emergent risk, risk perception and rethinking the definition of risk rationality

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Emergent risk often, but not always, takes us by surprise. This surprise can emerge in at least two distinct ways. The first relates to the relationship between technology and expertise and what happens when those technologies that we use to profile risk provide experts with estimates that contain a systematic bias. Such situations are not always the fault of technology, as it is now well-established that some risks (e.g. flood risk) are highly non-stationary in terms of both their underlying probability of occurrence and consequence. In some cases, they may be the fault of technology, or our failure to understand precisely those dimensions of risk that our technologies are telling us about.

However, there is a second kind of surprise that is endemic in relation to emergent risk, and this relates to a suite of psycho-social processes that influence the variability in space and time as to the extent to which we genuinely perceive a risk that is ever-present. This is variously labelled 'risk perception' or the 'social construction of risk'. From the perspective of rational explanation, such perceived risks appear to be in need of correction, through communication and education. But rational explanation overlooks what psycho-social research tells us about how we live with risk, notably the role played by risk heuristics, and how we prioritise an individual risk within the full suite of risks that we live with on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, this evidence places the materialisation of risk as events centre-stage in this prioritisation process: we inflate our perception of that which we experience. In a society that assumes, even requires, that management exists to sanitise our landscapes of the experience of risk, we find ourselves committed to removing the very cues that might help us to appreciate 'true risk'.

Any one risk, then, may become emergent not simply because risk is evolving, or being identified through new technical understanding, but simply because, when faced with a multitude of risks, each competing for our attention, those that emerge are those which we experience. If this is the case, then attempts to counter the supposed irrationality of decision-making surrounding risk need to be replaced by a much more nuanced form of public and policy engagement with risk, one that takes our perceptions as correct and seeks to adjust those rational accounts to be more sensitive to them.