

**Risk: a very short introduction**, by Baruch Fischhoff and John Kadvany, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, xv + 162 pp., £8, ISBN 978-0-19-957620-3

The number of risk-related books published in recent years has grown enormously. These books cover a wide range of risk-related issues (for example, risk communication, risk governance and risk management) and in a wide variety of contexts (for example, health risks, environmental risks and financial risks). In part, this growth in interest in risk management has been driven by high profile risk events, such as the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the recent financial crisis and the Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan. Additionally, this growth can be attributed to other effects, such as a perceived change in the nature of the risks we face. Unsurprisingly, this has acted as a spur to the development of a risk management profession.

Fischhoff and Kadvany's short introduction to risk focuses upon a number of key aspects of risk, embedding them within an overall framework of decision making. This provides the authors with a means of structuring the book to ensure it is comprehensible to, and suitable for, a broad range of audiences. The first chapter provides the context of the book by explaining that public and private risk decisions have common elements. These commonalities are: they have uncertain outcomes, they are located within a social context, and they are affected by the language used to frame the decision. The book then discusses how risk can be defined and analysed as a necessary prerequisite to making risky decisions, and how perceptions of risk and risk communication and culture (often inadvertently) impact on the risk decision process.

Chapter 2 is concerned with defining risk. The main premise of this chapter is that if we accept that risks arise when there is a possibility that we will lose something that has some degree of worth (for example, our health), then we can start to think about the issues that arise in measuring the potential loss. This can be especially problematic in areas such as loss of health or wellbeing. This exploration of the issues associated with defining risk lead on to a discussion of risk analysis in the third chapter. This chapter is concerned with how we might determine the scale of a risk and how we can establish what caused the risk. Fischhoff and Kadvany rightly emphasise that judgment plays a significant role in risk analysis and experts will often have to express a risk in terms of a range of probabilities. The principal difficulty these experts face is that they have to fuse together information from a wide range of sometimes conflicting sources.

Once a risk has been defined and analysed, it would appear a relatively straightforward task to make a decision based on this and choose a course of action that minimises the loss of value. However, Chapter 4 stresses that decision making is hampered as we are not wholly rational. We are hampered by a lack of mental capacity, which leads to our brains taking short cuts when decisions are made. Hence, we frequently use rule of thumb heuristics to process difficult decisions. Further, as prospect theory has shown that we evaluate gains or losses by comparison to a reference point, and we do not feel gains and losses of value in the same way, utility theory is not helpful for understanding how decisions are made.

Chapter 5 builds on this discussion of irrationality and heuristics. The fundamental issue it addresses is that most people are not risk experts, yet they have to make risk-based decisions. Lay people lack the depth of knowledge of the risk expert and this throws them onto relying upon intuition which, in turn, may be

affected by emotion. Consequently, this suggests there is a real need for risk communication as this can help the lay person make informed decisions. The problems and difficulties associated with risk communication are surveyed in Chapter 6. Framing risk communications so that they are not misinterpreted is problematic. A part of risk communication is conveying that risk experts do not possess an absolute knowledge of risks with some risk areas being especially contested. How, then, to involve the general public in participating in the process of risk communication?

The final chapter is a broader affair, concerning wider society and risk. This provides the authors with an opportunity to review some general risk questions connected to ideas of culture. For example, Mary Douglas's ideas on pollution and danger are briefly referred to, as are Ulrich Beck's ideas of a risk society.

After the first chapter has established the framework of the book, each subsequent chapter deals with discrete areas: defining risk, analysing risk, risk perceptions, risk communication and risk in relation to culture and society. Each chapter explains the results of a number of the most important risk-related studies and sets out key risk ideas, tying these back to the overarching theme of risk-related decision making. Short case studies that draw on well-known risk events, such as Hurricane Katrina and the Piper Alpha disaster, are also features of each chapter.

The inclusion of influential risk studies ensures readers are made aware of important milestones in risk thinking, such as Chauncey Starr's ideas concerning the social acceptability of risks, and prospect theory as developed by Kahnemann and Tversky. Referencing these studies ensures that, even though the book is relatively short, the content is not insubstantial and the book avoids becoming akin to a how-to-manage-risk type of text. Instead, it is a serious book that introduces problematic aspects of risk and adopts a critical standpoint. A further benefit of the inclusion of the studies is that, because they cover a broad range of items (from cholera outbreaks to climate change to nuclear safety), the book is relevant to a wide readership. This also holds true for its case studies.

It is important to stress that the purpose of this book is not to make a new contribution; rather, as one of the Very Short Introduction series from Oxford University Press, it is intended to provide a précis of key ideas in the risk field in an accessible manner. Therefore, it is not a book that has been written for risk experts and nor is it directed towards a particular category of risk management. The challenges authors confront when writing this type of book include: finding a way to structure the book to ensure it makes sense to the lay person seeking a risk primer, deciding what to keep in and what to leave out (as so much can be said about risk), keeping the reader interested (and remembering readers for this book could be from a range of backgrounds), and not letting one's own views shine through too strongly (this series is the wrong forum for riding on hobby horses). This book meets these challenges well.

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