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Special Issue on Risky Consumption

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### **Abstract**

The premise of this paper is that the consumption behaviour of ‘Northern’ citizens places Majority World citizens at great risk. A theoretical evolution suggested in this paper is the extension of the notion of risky consumption to include the impact of consumption on the human security of others. Until people can envision that their consumption behaviour places others at risk of exposure to harm, they will not see the need to perceive, assess and manage the risk. The paper tenders a preliminary reconceptualization of risk perception, using the conventional consumer behaviour model constructs of personal, distribution channel and situational factors. From this new perspective, instead of judging whether the good or service is risky for a ‘Northern’ citizen to consume, risk perception scholars would examine people’s perceptions of whether their consumption places fellow citizens at risk, the people laboring and producing the goods and services.

**Keywords:** ethical consumption, risky consumption, human security, perceived risk, Majority World, consumer behaviour

Traditionally, risky consumption deals with situations where consumers are placed at risk because of decisions they made in the marketplace, business actions, even government inaction. Conventional dimensions of the concept of risky consumption include the unknown and known risks associated with:

- ingesting an addictive, often illegal, substance (smoke, drugs, alcohol);
- ingesting an adulterated or spoiled food substance or contaminated water;
- buying stocks and bonds and other investment instruments;
- engaging in addictive behaviour, especially gambling and compulsive shopping;
- engaging in risky sexual behaviour (buying the services of a prostitute); and,
- engaging in excessive credit acquisition, leading to indebtedness and to bankruptcy.

The underlying notion of the conventional approach is that consumers doing the consuming (and those closely connected to them) will be harmed. Either their health is damaged, their finances and future security are compromised, their physical safety is jeopardized, or their personal relationships are fractured. Some scholars also propose that entire communities are compromised, if too many risky consumption behaviours occur (e.g., mad cow disease). The person engaged in the consumer behaviour experiences the risk first hand.

This paper will take a different approach. When answering the question, “Why and when is consumption risky?”, it will be assumed that the fallout of consumption can create profound risk (exposure to harm) for others who are *not* directly involved in the consumption act. Indeed,

they are producing the goods consumed by others. They comprise those living elsewhere and closer to home who are entrenched in the sweatshop, child labour, forced labour culture of modern globalization. A sweatshop is a business that regularly violates wage, child labor, health, environmental and/or safety laws (Boje 2001). Typical sweatshop employees, 90% of whom are women, are young and uneducated (between the ages of 16-25). Child labour (aged 9-14) is also a global issue. An estimated 246 million children are engaged in child labour. Of those, almost three-quarters (171 million) work in hazardous situations or conditions. Seventy percent work in agriculture (UNICEF 2005, Woolf 2001). They make our clothes, footwear, sporting goods, toys, electronics . . . everyday things that 'Northern' consumers take for granted.

The premise of this paper is that if consumers could be socialized to hold themselves accountable for the far reaching consequences of their consumption behaviour, their actions in the marketplace would less likely put others at risk. This approach broadens the focus of risk perception, reduction and management. It puts a different twist on the conventional understanding of risky consumption.

### **Applying Select Risk Perception Factors to Developed-World Consumption Behaviour**

Risk, as a social construct, has different meanings for different people (Lacroix and Powell, unpublished). Fundamentally, *risk* is defined as a person's possible exposure to loss, to harm or to damage. They can also be subjected to danger or to destruction. If the risk does not manifest, then no harm occurs, no loss is experienced, no damage is befallen.

*Risk perception* is the lens through which individuals view risk. It is defined as their judgement of the likelihood that a consequent loss or harm will occur, and as their judgement about the seriousness of its likely consequences (Nelson 2004; Fischhoff et al. 1978). Perception of a risk arises from unanticipated and uncertain consequences of the unpleasant nature resulting from purchasing a product (Dholakia 2001). Bettman (1973) proposes that each class of products (apparel, cars, cosmetics, electronics) has risk inherently associated it. This risk may become salient to a consumer when he or she interacts with that class of products. Scholars consider that risk preferences (what people will choose to experience or perceive as a risk) change with different situations (Yang 2004).

"A presupposition in theories of risk taking behaviour is that people actually perceive, become aware of, and evaluate risks *before* deciding which action to take [emphasis added]" (Weegels and Kanis 2000, p. 2). A challenge exists for those hoping to sensitize citizens to the risks associated with their consumption. It is that people seldom make the connection between shopping and harming others. They do not see (perceive) themselves creating any risk (McGregor 2004). In fact, Weegels and Kanis note that consumers do not assess the risk associated with doing everyday things, one of which is consumption. This lack of perception of risk to others has consequences, and is influenced by a collection of factors.

Using a basic consumer behaviour theory approach, Figure 1 illustrates a three-pronged model to represent a collection of factors effecting risk perception as conceptualized in this paper: personal factors, distribution channel factors and situational factors (Mowen, 1993). This list is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the phenomenon. Personal factors relate to age, gender, income, et cetera, factors that set one person or cohort apart from another. Personal predispositions to risk, to tolerance of risk and to other aspects of risk behaviour fall under this heading. Distribution channel factors include the labourers, producers, retailers, marketers, advertisers and other agents involved in creating and making the product or service available in the marketplace. Situational factors are elements of the consumer transaction that change from one situation to another. In combination, they create the circumstances for any given moment or

point in time. In general they comprise: (a) physical surroundings, (b) social surroundings (the effect of other people), (c) task definition (why the consumer is buying the product), (d) time, and (e) antecedent moods or emotional states that the consumer brings to the consumption activity.

### **Insert Figure 1 about here**

Mowen (1993) confirms that these three factors interact with each other, contributing to people's perceptions of whether Majority world citizens are exposed to risk when 'Northern' citizens consume. To that end, the focus of this paper is 'people at risk from our consumption.' The following text will draw on select aspects of conventional risk perception theory, and explain them while applying them to consumption in the global sweatshop culture. The paper does not offer empirical evidence; rather, it proposes a conceptual framework to shape future dialogue about this consumer issue.

#### **Degree of Knowledge and Information**

The first factor is the extent to which people feel informed and knowledgeable about a risk. The more prior knowledge they have, the higher their perception of risk (Zepeda, Douthitt and You 2003). When people consume goods made in the sweatshop culture, they may expose the people making the goods to risks. Sweatshop conditions have been well documented and relate to: deplorable, sometimes life threatening, working conditions; infraction of human rights, including below subsistence wages; and, reduced familial and community resilience. But, most people do not make these connections (Global Exchange 2005; Woolf 2001). Diamond (1988) found that people are less inclined to focus on the probability of risks occurring, and are more likely to focus on the severity of any consequences which might be attached to the event. If people do not even perceive that buying goods exposes others to risks, they surely will not consider the likelihood of the risk happening, let alone the severity of the fallout.

This disconnect plays out in the following ways. Almost all of today's consumer products are made by people who cannot be seen, working offshore, thousands of miles away. Resources used to make products are extracted in countries thousands of miles away - invisible. Free trade rules, which place money first and people second, are made behind closed doors. There is no place for consumers, citizens or labourers at the table. International financial institutions control these processes. They are focused on reducing barriers to trade, so they can create a global market for their products. One result is that people are so far removed from the source of the goods and services that they consume, they can readily create a dichotomy of "we and they", and morally dissociate (McGregor 2004, 2005b).

#### **Perception of Locus of Control**

Another factor affecting risk perception is a person's mental image of their control of things (the ability to influence) (Lacroix and Powell unpublished; Moreno and Tarragó 2003). This perception can refer to control over what is available in the marketplace, control over the human condition and situations of others, control over the actions of transnational corporations and governments, even control over their own actions. The more control people feel that they have, the less likely they are to perceive that they are placing someone else in a risky situation, or perpetuating that situation. This idea is commonly referred to as internal or external locus of control (Rotter 1990). Persons with an internal locus of control see themselves responsible for the outcomes of their own actions. People with an external locus of control rely on luck, and are more likely to view themselves as the victim in any given situation. Furthermore, although people may believe that how a future event turns out is under their control, they may or may not believe that they are capable of behaving in a way that will produce the result they desire.

For example, consumers may know that they are exposing others to risk if they buy sweatshop-produced goods, but they do not believe they have any other way to shop. Hence, they perceive that they cannot act in a way that would reduce or alleviate the risk. Barnett, Cafaro and Newholm (2005) offer more insights into this dilemma. They note that a consumer may refuse to buy goods which children have made, because of an adherence to the fundamental moral rule against exploitation of children. But, this decision is gravely complicated when the consumer learns that boycotting a company which employs children can lead to the child not working, resulting in the loss of the sole source of family income. It is estimated that, of the 2.2 billion children in the world, nearly 250 million children, living in the Majority world, work in sweatshops. This amounts to nearly 20% of the world's total child population (Boje 2001). The consumer may decide to keep buying, while counting on long term trade conditions to change so that the situation of these children is improved, and the risk of harm is reduced. The consumer is still faced with the decision of how long to give the company the benefit of the doubt.

Because so many things are out of people's control, it is very hard for them to assess risk in these circumstances. Indeed, a recent United Kingdom study, claiming to be the most in-depth research to date into ethical consumerism, found that only 11% of consumers strongly believed their ethical shopping choices will make a significant difference (Cowe and Williams 2003). Hines and Ames (2000) claim that about 50% of UK consumers feel they can make a difference in corporate social behaviour. Locus of control seems to be a key factor in this new notion of risk perception.

### **Degree of Perceived Risk**

A third factor affecting risk perception is the degree of perceived risk. This concept focuses on the extent to which people actually feel there is a potential for harm, damage or injury, and the extent to which they see this as a high or low risk situation. Generally, when the risk is perceived to be high, consumers seek to take actions to reduce risk to *themselves* (Mitchell 1998). They can do this by taking personal action to avoid or reduce the risk, and they can demand that others do this on their behalf (Slovic 1987). Does this preemptive trait translate to situations when their behaviour exposes *others* to risk, especially the risk of the other person's human security? Are people capable of perceiving that their consumption habits have the potential to place others at a high risk of ongoing oppression, exploitation, and marginalization? With such an understanding, can they be motivated to change their consumption habits to alleviate this risk? What would 'Northern' consumers consider a high enough risk to the human security of others, that they would change their consumption behaviour? The following facts reveal some compelling risk scenarios; yet, consumption levels continue to rise (Worldwatch Institute 2004):

- the 12% of the world living in North America and Western Europe account for nearly two thirds (60%) of global private consumption;
- global private consumption topped \$20 trillion in 2000, up from \$4.8 trillion in 1960 (300% increase);
- the one-third of the world's population living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa consume 3.2% of private goods and services;
- in most developing countries, less than half of the population belong to the consumer class, suggesting considerable potential for billions more consumers;
- in 2002, more than one billion households (three quarters of the world's households) had at least one TV meaning they had global exposure to the media that perpetuates consumption;

- 43 million low paid laborers work in more than 3000 Export Processing Zones in 166 nations (2002) which are often criticized for human rights and labor abuses;
- the pace of technological innovation is growing exponentially: it took 38 years for the radio to reach 50 million people, 13 years for TV, and four years for the Internet;
- in 2002, two thirds of American consumers carried \$12,000 in just credit card debt;
- nearly all of the world's ecosystems are shrinking to make way for humans, with an estimate that the planet's ecological health has declined by 35% since 1970; and,
- earning a higher salary adds only moderate, if any, additions to self-reported happiness.

Mitchell (1998) notes that people have a general predisposition to perceive either high or low risk across a range of products. For example, someone may consistently perceive all cars, tools and weapons as risky products. Can the same thing be said for people's general predisposition to perceive their consumption choices as either all high or all low relative to placing others at risk? Barnett et al. (2004) offer the situational variable of geography as an idea that relates to this question. They suggest that responsible, ethical action is predicated on how people understand place and space. Simply put, the 'moral turn' for consumption concerns *caring at a distance*, revolving around the question of, 'what obligations do people tend to have to *distant others*?' The assumption is that caring up close is easier than caring at a distance. They coin the phrase 'the geographies of responsibilities' to accommodate the idea that distance is a source of moral harm because it renders the consequences of routine activities (like consumption) unintelligible to actors. People are not able to grasp the impact of their consumption decisions, because of the incongruence between social space and physical place/distance.

### **Purchase Satisfaction and Expectations of Risk**

The notion of a person's expectation of a risk is a fourth factor of risk perception. Conventional risk theory deals with the consumers' degree of disappointment or satisfaction relative to whether the purchase or service met their expectations for risk (for example, Mitra et al. 1999). If they did not perceive a risk, but *were* harmed, they would be dissatisfied. How difficult will it be to get consumers to shift perspectives, and to gauge their expected satisfaction with a product based on whether its production harmed someone else or placed them at risk? Is it possible that a new component of consumer expectations is that people who are laboring to make consumer items are being exposed to risks, or actually harmed? Bird and Hughes (1997) wonder about this, claiming that the willingness to purchase goods based on ethical credentials (a proxy for exposure to risk) is limited to a minority of shoppers.

People's expectation of exposing others to risk when they consume is also shaped by whether they are dealing with an inherent or a handled risk. A risk which is inherent is latent, capable of being, but not yet in existence. A handled risk refers to the risk reduction processes that a consumer employs to 'handle' the risk. It is affected by the amount of conflict encountered with producers or retailers when a consumer chooses their brand or store (Bettman 1973). Familiarity with the workings of the global economic system, the corporate accountability of transnational corporations, and the impact of economic development and growth on human and social development all effect whether a consumer sees the purchase of a product from a particular producer or retailer as risky behaviour. Familiarity with a producer/retailer can lead to both the perception of the likely occurrence of a risk, and to the propensity to take steps to handle this risk. For example, knowing that certain retailers routinely buy products made in sweatshops is a revelation that flags an inherent risk in patronizing this store. By handling this risk, consumers can ensure that their purchase can meet their acceptable levels of risk, their

expectations.

Also, it is noteworthy that it is very difficult to monitor or track whether one consumer's consumption decision has harmed someone else. How is Janice supposed to find out if buying a pair of Nike running shoes exposed Maria to a risk (working conditions, human rights, wages, etc)? Not being able to garner impact at the level of an individual purchase will have ramifications on consumers' expectations of whether their purchase will harm another person.

### **Past Experience with the Risk**

A fifth factor related to risk perception is past experience with a particular risk. People can make judgements about risk on the basis of what they have experienced in the past, even if they lack full knowledge (Moreno and Tarragó 2003). In fact, most decisions about risk are made with partial information because the future is unknown. Right now, most consumers have a dearth of past experience with consumer decisions that take into account the moral and ethical implications of their purchase decisions. A recent United Kingdom survey revealed that only one in 10 consumers frequently buy products on ethical grounds (Cowe and Williams 2003), meaning that 90% do not take into account the risk of harming others with their purchases. Countries of origin, working conditions, labour abuses, and human rights infractions are simply not common choice criteria for the majority of consumers. Lacroix and Powell (unpublished) note that risk perception is related to the consumer's familiarity with the potential risk. When people become concerned with the risk of exposing others to harm or danger, as a result of their consumption, it is possible they can move beyond price and quality and expand their choice criteria (Harrison, Newholm and Shaw 2005). Until then, price, quality, convenience and brand loyalty are still the most important choice criteria (De Pelsmacker, Driesen and Rayp 2005).

Indeed, whereas conventional risk perception research holds that too much information aggravates a person's ability to assess the risk (e.g., Ha 2002), the opposite is likely true for assessing the risk of harming others. Very little information is forthcoming from producers and retailers about such key choice criteria as country of origin, living wages and rights infractions. Consumers are severely challenged to bring these choice criteria to bear on their consumption decisions, because they lack this information. The information situation is better for the plight of producers (e.g., coffee, cocoa, bananas), because the fair trade movement has made their stories available, at least in the alternative media (Ransom 2001).

### **Influence of Activists**

A sixth factor related to risk perception is the influence of activists. Slovic (1987) notes that, by demanding that others do this on their behalf, consumers can seek to reduce risk. They can expect activists to lobby governments for change, to provide information about unethical corporate behaviour, to support the development of alternative products, and to act as a fair trade retailer or reference point for other like minded retailers (Lang and Gabriel 2005). Using Lacroix and Powell's (unpublished) logic, it can be argued that fair trade, sweatshop, child labour, green, and ethical consumerism activists can be perceived as risk managers who work to reduce, mitigate or minimize the risk of consumption on others. However, despite how often the polls reveal that consumers want to act honorably, activists have found that good deals and cheaper products always seem to trump social justice issues (Lang and Gabriel). MacGillivray (2000) found that products which are free from child labour, made from legally logged wood, or produced via fair trade have a market share of less than 1%. 'Northern' consumers' lack of market uptake could stem from their lack of perception that their consumption is risky to those who make the goods. This lack of perception could stem from issues related to information and knowledge, value systems, interest or motivation (to be discussed shortly).

## **Outrage**

A seventh factor related to risk perception is outrage. Sandman et al. (1993) and Moreno and Tarragó (2003) explain that outrage is a function of whether people feel they can trust authorities and whether the control over the management of the risk is shared. In the conventional sense of risk perception, outrage is attributed to situations where people are concerned with harm to themselves. This concept includes comprehension of an issue, uncertainty, delayed effects, dread, and effects on children and on future generations. It also encompasses reversibility, the ethical and moral nature of the situation, and whether the risk stems from man-made or natural origins (Covello and Sandman 2001).

With ease, the notion of outrage can be applied to whether consumers perceive their consumption as a risk to others. Is the harm caused by their consumption reversible? Can they be certain that their purchase decisions will not harm others? Will there be negative effects on future generations of citizens because of their ongoing consumption decisions and consumer lifestyle? Will they be able to determine if possible harm will be immediate or be delayed? Can they trust transnational corporations to engage in socially responsible production, thereby sharing the burden of reducing risk to others?

The issue here is that people cannot feel outrage over the risks associated with the impact of their consumption choices, if they do not comprehend the situation. The current global economic system is predicated on cheap labour with its attendant fallout on Majority world citizens, vis-a-vis their well-being and quality of life. People tend to trust the authorities (government and corporations) to play their part in the economic system. They tend to abdicate responsibility to these other market players. They do not see themselves as sharing the management of any risks associated with activities in the global market. Once they do gain this appreciation, it is anticipated that their degree of outrage may well become a true factor that mitigates their consumer behaviour.

This event will be mediated by moral intensity, the degree to which a consumer *perceives* that a purchase demands the application of ethical principles. Several factors come into play that effect moral intensity, notably similar with the factors affecting outrage and other factors shaping risk perception (Benthin, Slovic and Severson 1993). These factors include the following: length of time between consuming and the manifestation of any consequences of this act, expectations that the impact will be negative, belief that these consequences will actually take place, closeness felt to those who will be affected, belief that a large number of people may be harmed, and level of agreement in society that consuming this way is unacceptable (Collins 1989; Izzo 1997; Jones 1991).

## **Worldview**

Palmer (1996) and Sjöberg (1998) both examine the link between worldviews and risk perception (a ninth factor). They draw on the normative Cultural Theory approach to understand risk perception (as opposed to the psychometric approach). Household consumption decisions are inextricably linked with values and social meaning, and are signifiers of cultural allegiance and social relationships. But, these values, meanings and significance are shaped by worldviews. The worldview or paradigm which people embrace affects their sense of social solidarity, and leads to competing cultures of consumption (Seyfang, 2004). He proposes four such cultures: (a) responsible consumption (hierarchist worldview); (b) reduced consumption (egalitarian); (c) opportunistic consumption (individualist); and, (d) ad-hoc consumption (fatalist). Those holding egalitarian and hierarchist worldviews have a high sense of social justice, social cohesion/collective identity and equity. Conversely, individualists and fatalists believe in

competition, accept inequality, and have a low sense of collective identity. This theory of risk perception, which is deemed to hold across people and nations, can offer interesting explanations for why people might not perceive their consumption decisions as risky for others.

### **Other Personal and Situational Factors**

Finally, other factors related to risk perception can include: value systems, psychological traits, culture, demographics, placement within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, marginality, ethnicity, biases, and choice heuristics. Situational factors also come into play (see Figure 1) (Boholm 1998; Hughes, Lerman and Lustbader 1996; Mitchell, 1998; Moreno and Tarragó 2003; Sjöberg 2000; Zepeda, Douthitt and You 2003). A few of these factors will be addressed, appreciating that "risk perception is a phenomenon in search of an explanation" (Sjöberg, 2000, p.1).

Age, gender, education, and socioeconomic class have all been examined in the risk perception literature, with mixed findings. This research focused on people being harmed by consuming a product they bought, rather than people being harmed by someone else buying a product. Yet, common sense suggests that demographics will play a role in this new notion of risky consumption. Take gender, for example. Moral development theorists have shown that men and women embrace different moral foci, and hold dissimilar notions of rights and responsibilities. They hold different moral imperatives, use different logic, perceive problems differently, and make decisions differently (McGregor, 2005b). Gustafson (1998) also notes that "a substantial body of risk research indicates that women and men differ in their perceptions of risk" (p. 805).

Verhage, Yavas and Green (1990) observe that all cultures have developed an understanding of perceived risk. But, there are inter-country differences in how people reduce the risks. Also, Rohrmann (1999) notes that the cross-cultural view of risk perception is receiving a lot of attention in the literature. His analysis of 16 studies shows considerable cross-cultural differences in risk perception and evaluation. Weber and Hsee (1998) discovered that, while people from different cultures hold similar attitudes toward risk, they differ on what they perceive to be a risk. By extension, these findings imply that consumers living in different countries and cultures will hold differing conceptualizations of whether harming others through their consumption constitutes a risk, and what they believe they should do about it.

### **Summary**

It is unthinkable, for most people, to see themselves perpetuating the onslaught of human rights infringements, labour infractions, injustice, inner turmoil, ecological destruction, even war, when all they do is:

- buy a coffee with a friend, a chocolate bar for a stressful day, a diamond ring for a loved one;
- buy a piece of furniture made of mahogany, a bottle of water for convenience or safety, a Disney toy for a child;
- buy a treat at McDonald's, a healthy snack like a banana, a computer; or,
- buy hockey skates for a child so she can be involved in the community and sports, a hot chocolate on a cold winter's day, even buy flowers for someone (McGregor, 2004).

These seem like such innocuous, benign purchases, often done when people are trying to form and nurture relationships with other people on a social or emotional level (McGregor 2004). To reiterate, Weegels and Kanis (2000) note that consumers do not assess the risk associated with doing everyday things. Who would have thought that these regular purchases have such ramifications on the exposure of others to risk? But, they do.



This paper developed the case that unaccountable consumption is very risky behaviour which needs to be understood in order to be modified. Research has shown that people continue to engage in risky behaviour even when they know about the risk. However, research has also shown that risk perception and knowledge *can* induce risk reduction behaviour (Yeung & Yee 2003). This risk reduction behavior could include information seeking or realigning consumption with different value premises (justice, security, freedom, peace). The bottom line is that, until people can envision their consumption behaviour placing others at risk of being exposed to harm, they will not be able to see the need to perceive, assess and manage the risk. Perception of risks during shopping activities is not a new concept. Conceiving shopping as *exposing others to risk*, those who labour to make the goods, is a new approach. It is a logical extension of the study of ethical consumption. Indeed, consumption, in general, is not to blame; rather, how one consumes is the central problem. Consuming, without taking into account the impact of one's decisions on those living elsewhere, is a risky endeavor for all concerned.

To deal with this marketplace reality, the paper shared an overview of a new approach to conceptualizing risk perception. The theoretical evolution, suggested in this paper, is the extension of the notion of risky consumption to include the impact of consumption on the human security of others. Using the conventional consumer behaviour model constructs of personal, distribution channel and situational factors, the paper tendered a preliminary reconceptualization of risk perception (see Figure 1). From this new perspective, instead of judging whether the good or service is risky for a 'Northern' citizen to consume, risk perception scholars would examine people's perceptions of whether their consumption places fellow citizens at risk, the people who are laboring and producing the goods and services.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The final section of the paper will touch on some implications of this new approach: the need for empirical verification of the relationships posited in the paper, the addition of the notion of human security to risk perception literature, the ethical and moral undertones of this shift in perspective, and the import on consumer socialization and education.

### **Empirical Verification**

The literature cited in this paper almost exclusively dealt with empirical studies exploring consumers' risk perception of harm to themselves when using a product or service. New research has to reframe this work so it explores how people develop perceptions of the risk their consumption has on others making the products. In order to achieve a higher appreciation of risky consumption conceptualized in this paper, educators, researchers and policy makers must be open to shifting their perception of what constitutes a risk. Even more important, researchers have to explore how factors shaping risk perception interact with each other. Also, it is imperative that scholars note that the concept of 'risk' has different meanings for experts than for lay persons (Slovic 1987). Among others, Shaw (2005) is making great progress in empirically modeling ethical consumer decision making. Ethics and risk (especially the moral risk of harming others) have always been connected. Perhaps it is time to also explore whether risk perception, reduction and management, as explained in this paper, are components of ethical consumer behaviour.

### **Human Security**

Extending the notion of risky consumption, to include the impact of consumption on the human security of others, is a theoretical evolution suggested in this paper - a change in conceptual perspective. The risk of endangering and compromising the human security of those who make the majority of the goods available for purchase around the world should not be

ignored. McGregor (2003) claims that human security can be enhanced by making responsible consumption decisions in one's role as a global citizen. Security, simply put, means protecting self, *other people* or society from threats and challenges to safety, and to existence. Being secure means that risks (exposure to harm or to danger) have been reduced or eliminated. The human security concept includes personal well-being of individuals and their ability to feel secure in the basic needs that affect their day-to-day existence: food, health, shelter, employment, population, human rights, environment, culture, political voice, social welfare and education (Nef 1999). The consumption behaviour of 'Northern' consumers places Majority World citizens at great risk.

### **Ethical and Moral Undertones**

A true commitment to the human security of all the worlds' citizens is not beyond reach. But, new theoretical constructs, and ways of framing consumption, are needed to further ensure this goal. This paper is a contribution to that valued social goal - an awareness that consumption imposes grave risks on those making the products in the global economy, and that continuing on the current trajectory is not a moral option. Ethical consumerism requires a *conscience* (Autio 2005). Using Tucker's (1994) definition, one can suggest that, when people can see into the complexity of a consumer purchase decision, look with penetrating insight into all of the risk possibilities, and understand the true impact of each possible choice, they are using moral consciousness. But, this requirement cannot be met if people are not even *conscious* that they are putting others at risk of harm or lack of security with their buying behaviour. From a holistic world paradigm, a moral imperative is key to this notion of risk perception. This paradigm holds that all citizens of the world are intricately linked via consumption behaviour (Shanahan and Carlsson-Kanyama 2005).

### **Consumer Socialization and Education**

Recognizing this interrelatedness, McGregor (2005a) recommends using critical consumer education as a socialization agent to teach people to choose their *intentions* when they consume. This approach means people can learn to consciously choose the consequences they want when they consume. If consumers can visualize that their consuming decisions perpetuate risks for those who make the goods, then they can move ahead to engage in forms of risk assessment, reduction and management that take into consideration the common good. Education is a powerful socialization agent to scaffold this transformation in how people see themselves as actors in the global economy, shifting from consumers to citizen-consumers.

### **Conclusion**

The conceptual framework used in this paper (see Figure 1) is a preliminary attempt to pull together some key factors that might shape consumers' perceptions of the risk of harming others when consuming. This conceptual innovation rings true with Nelson's (2004) definition of risk perception. It is the process by which someone interprets data and stimuli into usable mental representations of the world. It is a key component of the *process of knowing* oneself as a consumer, and is a way for a consumer to be accountable for the risks imposed on those making the goods. Instead of judging whether the good or service is risky for them to consume, people would judge whether the impact of their consumer action places fellow citizens at risk, the people laboring and producing in the global economy.

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**Figure 1 - Factors affecting people's perception of placing others at risk from their consumption**

