

# Don't rely on cold reason - trust your intuition as well

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Risk and uncertainty are part of modern life, but why does the possibility of terrorist bombs on aeroplanes, a new generation of nuclear power stations and a flu pandemic trigger public distrust in the powers-that-be? What can the government do to re-build trust in politicians and scientists?

Risk researchers say the answer lies in emotions, not reason, especially when the perceived risk is related to health, the environment, new technologies and energy. 'There is a lot of evidence that concern about risk is directly related to lack of knowledge and the extent to which the event is dreaded,' says Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby, Director of the Economic and Social Research Council Social Context and Responses to Risk Network (SCARR) at the University of Kent. 'And trust always involves emotion as well as reason.'

'The way that information about a particular risk is transmitted and interpreted by various audiences is also important in determining how people respond,' Peter Taylor-Gooby explains. 'Government should be certainly thinking about building trust, but it is very difficult to do. People need to feel they are being taken seriously and it would help if there was more reporting back after public consultations. Transparency is the key, particularly when mistakes have been made.'

How people handle uncertainties – in relation to topics including unemployment, pensions, GM foods, health care and nuclear power – is the subject of an event to be held at the University of East Anglia on

September 7th. Researchers from a number of social science disciplines will present their latest findings at the Coping with Uncertainty event in Norwich during the British Academy Festival of Science.

‘Every day we probably take some routine risks without thinking – like driving to work or taking an escalator – but we also have to take serious decisions about jobs, marriage or buying a car without enough information and certainty to make a rational choice,’ says Dr Jens Zinn, from University of Kent, who has been studying the way in which people draw on emotion, intuition, trust or rules of thumb when making decisions. ‘Strategies in between pure rationality and blind faith or hope become more and more important in a world with growing uncertainties,’ he says.

Media scare stories about all kinds of threats, from the Millennium bug and bird flu, to the dangers to health of mobile phones and GM foods, have been blamed for making people more fearful of technological innovations and less trusting of scientists and government. Researchers Jenny Kitzinger and Emma Hughes, University of Cardiff, have analysed British media coverage of ‘risk’ in relation to the debates on genetically modified crops and human genetic research. They will tell the meeting that journalists did not cover the stories as a purely scientific issue, but drew on a plethora of social and cultural factors, such as concepts of nationality, nature and purity, to describe potential risks.

In his presentation, Professor Nick Pidgeon, Cardiff University, will describe how people deal with the risks associated with living close to a nuclear power station. The findings are based on ‘personal risk biographies’ covering people’s feelings about nuclear risks, the trade-offs between risks and various monetary and non-monetary benefits and the way in which the perception of risk changes as it becomes a familiar part of daily life.

Source: Economic and Social Research Council

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