



Human Dymensions Quarterly Newsletter Culture, Learning and Risk

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Human Dymensions December 2014

A quarterly newsletter of research and news about Human Dymensions and the Social Psychology of Risk

Feature Article - Desensitization to Risk



IN OTHER NEWS

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One of the peculiar norms of being human is the process of desensitization. Humans develop diminished awareness, alertness and consciousness as repetition, regularity, familiarity and habit are amplified. Desensitization is about becoming less sensitive to others and things due to the rate of exposure. When this happens with regards to risk, humans tend to underestimate and become less sensitive to risk intensity. However, desensitization is not all bad, it is also a technique for helping people overcome phobias, fears and anxiety. Like many human dispositions, there seems to be a dark and light side to the way we work. There are often helpful and unhelpful by-products to various human characteristics. 'Priming' people to overcome mental health disorders through desensitization is a good thing. But do we consider the process of desensitization in the way we 'prime' populations of workers through our discourse and language? Do we desensitize populations of workers to risk by our 'double speak' about risk? Do we focus on risk aversion so much that we 'dumb down' the worker population to 'thinking' about risk? How much do we consider the nature of desensitization in the way we develop systems and processes to manage risk? How often is the topic of desensitization incorporated into consultation and conversations about risk?

The processes of amplification and desensitization of risk is individual and social. It is nonsense to propose that the assessment and management of risk is objective. There is no common sense about risk engagement.

In order to live with complexity humans develop mental short cuts, 'rules of thumb' and micro-rules so that many things can be done unconsciously, these are called heuristics. Heuristics enable humans not to 'think' about things and to 'detach' from activities, as it is running on 'autopilot'. We often drive like this, not really 'thinking' consciously about all aspects of driving for example, foot on the pedal, holding the steering wheel and looking. We just do these things. When we first learnt to drive a car the intensity of concentration required was overwhelming. When we learn to drive competently we do most of the mechanics of driving in automatic. The car is not only in 'drive', our mind is too.

The Handbook to Risk Management - Principles and Guidelines (AS/NZS ISO 31000:2009 Standards Australia) is entitled Communicating and Consulting About Risk (HB 327:2010). This wonderful little (28 page) handbook introduces the reader to the place of heuristics in understanding, communicating and managing risk. In section 2.2 of the Handbook entitled How 'Rule of Thumb' Affects Perceptions (p. 12), there is a helpful discussion about heuristics.

Heuristics are judgmental rules or “rule of thumb” shortcuts that people use to help gauge situations and help them to make decisions. Three of the most influential shortcuts used when people evaluate risk are “availability”, “representativeness” and “anchoring and adjustment”.

Availability: People use the availability heuristic to judge the likelihood of events by the ease (availability) of imagining or recall of them. People tend to give higher probabilities than is really warranted to comparatively rare events if they have seen or heard of an occurrence recently. They tend to give lower probabilities to commonplace accidents.

Representativeness: People “place” an event by its characteristics. They estimate the likelihood of an event by its similarity to another type of event. This leads to a type of bias known as the “gambler’s fallacy” which misjudges the law of probabilities. For example, because a coin toss has not yielded “heads” for six throws it is believed that a head is more likely to occur on the next throw when of course the probability of a head remains 50% for the next throw irrespective of the outcomes that preceded it. This is particularly evident when people are asked to judge the frequency of comparatively rare events such as floods.

Anchoring and adjustment: This involves linking the risky situation to an initially presented value, the anchor. If a risk is not particularly well known and an initial estimate is given, then people tend to revise their estimate by making minor adjustments to that initial estimate. For this reason, negotiators often try to set the initial point of negotiation well into their target territory.

Heuristics are valid risk assessment tools in some circumstances and can lead to “good” estimates of statistical risk in situations where risks are well known. In other cases, where little is actually known about a risk, large and persistent biases may give rise to fears that have no provable foundation; conversely, such as for risk associated with foodborne diseases, inadequate attention may be given to issues that should be of genuine concern.

Although limitations and biases can be easily demonstrated, it is not valid to label heuristics as “irrational” since in most everyday situations, rule-of-thumb judgements provide an effective and efficient approach for estimating risk levels. It’s not unusual for specialists to also rely on heuristics when they have to apply judgment or rely on intuition.

But heuristics often leads to overconfidence. Both lay people and specialists place considerable (sometimes unjustified) faith in judgments reached by using heuristics. In particular, “awareness” of a hazard does not imply any other knowledge than that the hazard exists, but people may be tempted to pass judgment and make decisions based on this alone.

What I find fascinating is how many professionals in risk do not know of this handbook or about heuristics. I often speak to people who are safety or security experts and risk managers who know of neither. The topic of desensitization to risk is not even on the radar and is certainly not in the discourse of their organisation. So as experts and regulators continue to multiply systems, regulations and checklists there is little consideration that in their efforts at cognitive overload, they drive the by-product of desensitization. This is evidenced in the Australian idiom of ‘tick and flick’. When the human mind is saturated with excessive exposure to something we trigger desensitization. Gerald Wilde (1994, Target Risk 2) first named this as ‘risk homeostasis’. For an overview of risk homeostasis go to <http://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/4/2/89.full>.

Gawande’s book *The Checklist Manifesto, How to Get Things Right* (2010) is a book that demonstrates the importance of checklists and how checklists can stimulate memory and minimize mistakes. Unfortunately, the book over emphasizes the value of checklists and omits to discuss the problem of desensitization. So without checklists we are likely to make mistakes. With excessive checklists we are more likely to make mistakes. Here we are again, confronted by the ‘ying’ and ‘yang’ of risk homeostasis.

Unfortunately, regulators and bureaucrats don’t seem to know about this, maybe this is too counterintuitive for the public service? The worst example of excesses in systems and checklists is experienced in the activities of the Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner (OFSC). Charged with the mandate to reform the risky culture of building and construction (2004), the OFSC is single handedly turning the excesses of checklists into an art form. The by-product of OFSC desensitization to risk is a more complacent workforce, ambivalent to risk, heightened skepticism and cynicism about the value of paperwork associated with risk. The very thing the OFSC wants to promote in value is being de-valued by the way they behave. The OFSC has now created a sub-culture in the building and construction industry that laughs at the nonsense of their activity. In a strange sense of risk schizophrenia, the industry endures the excesses of the OFSC to gain access to government funding but when the OFSC leaves the building they have created a whole new sub-culture of ‘double speak’. The solution to a failed checklist process is not another checklist to check the checklist.

So, how can organisations attend to the issue of desensitization? The following may be helpful:

1. To start, be aware that desensitization, heuristics and hemostasis are key factors in the assessment and management of risk.
2. Ensure that the topic of desensitization is a focus of systems development and design.
3. Make the issue of desensitization a central factor in organizational dialogue.

4. Learn more about homeostasis and how it works. Human Dymensions offers a range of programs that assist organisations to become more intelligent in systems design and risk management.
5. Reininvigorate the importance of conversations about risk in the business.
6. Train up iCue© champions to help leaders listen and respond to desensitization in the organisation. The Human Dymensions PROACT Program assists organisations in doing this.
7. Place a stronger emphasis on how social arrangements influence decision making and utilize social dynamics to monitor desensitization.
8. Review company discourse and language with a focus on how such language 'primes' the population and the resultant by-products associated with corporate messages.
9. Review work areas that processes that are repetitive, habitual and frequent and conduct mini-meetings with workers to discuss the nature and climate of their work. Take suggestions to enable greater variation and awareness without leading into new forms of misdirection and change.
10. Get rid of excesses in systems that can be accommodated by verbal, visual and non-bureaucratical approaches to managing risk.

Post Graduate News

Graduate Certificate in the Social Psychology of Risk

Enrolments are filling up quickly for the 2014 Graduate Certificate in the Social Psychology of Risk at the Australian Catholic University with Dr Long. The first unit is an intensive 4.5 day face-to-face Introduction to the Social Psychology of Risk. This opening unit is being held on 10-14 March 2014.



Details about the structure of the Grad Certificate are here:
<http://www.humandymensions.com/post-graduate-studies>

You can secure your place with a deposit online or contact admin@humandymensions.com for more details.

A report and testimonials from the 2013 group of students is here:
<http://www.safetyrisk.net/post-graduate-studies-in-the-social-psychology-of-risk/>

MiProfile© Masterclass

Dr Long is conducting a MiProfile© Masterclass on 3-7 March 2014 for people interested in understanding and gaining accreditation to deliver the Human Dymensions MiProfile© culture survey tool. You can see what the MiProfile tool is about here <http://vimeo.com/24764673> or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbLbcahklm0>

The workshop is being conducted at the Australian Catholic University in Canberra and is accredited towards the post graduate program. The MiProfile© Masterclass Workshop includes skill development in: tacit knowledge methodologies, technical use of implicit knowledge surveying, understanding the competing values framework, embedding social psychology diagnostic tools in strategic thinking, technical ICT skill development with Keith Lewis and the construction of cultural diagnostics.

For a Unit outline or to secure your place please contact admin@humandymensions.com

SEEK Unit – The Social Psychology of Incident Investigation

Another unit in the post graduate program is the SEEK (Social psychology Event Exploration Knowledge) module. This 4.5 day unit can be delivered in accredited or non-accredited format and has an emphasis on: the subjectivity of the investigator, understanding social arrangements as a cause, causal complexity and wicked problems, attribution and projection in investigation, psychological tools to enhance investigations, common techniques and mechanics of investigations, understanding culture and observation tools for cultural analysis, people skills and consultation, risk intelligence and the personality of investigator.

Books to Read Over Christmas



For those of you wondering what to read over Christmas, here are a few recommendations from some of the books Rob has enjoyed in 2013.

Higgins, E. Tory., (2012) *Beyond Pleasure and Pain, How Motivation Works.* Oxford. New York.

Klein, G., (2003) *The Power of Intuition.* Doubleday, New York.

Michael, D., (1973) *Learning to Plan, and Planning to Learn.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Riggio, R. et.al., (2008) The Art of Followership. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Schein, E., (2013) Humble Enquiry, The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling. Berrett-Koehler. San Francisco.

Research - Words Like 'Zero' Can Change Your Brain



Research by Newberg and Waldman (Words Can Change Your Brain) shows that words affect brain plasticity. In other words, hearing words and 'priming' by words rewires the brain. So whilst some people maintain the illogical notion that words such as 'zero' are harmless and aspirational, the research demonstrates the opposite. Newberg and Waldman's work shows that positive words, such as 'peace' and 'love', can alter the expression of genes, strengthening areas in our frontal lobes and promoting the brain's cognitive functioning.

On the other hand, negative language, especially language that 'primes' failure, plays a disruptive role in the production of neurochemicals that manage anxiety. This is also demonstrated by the extensive work of Bargh (The New Unconscious) and Wegner (White Bears and Other Unwanted Thoughts: Suppression, Obsession, and the Psychology of Mental Control). Enter your description

Research - Your Visual Neurons Cut Corners

Despite the amazing power of the brain we know its resources are limited, we live with fallibility. In the optic nerve there are significant limitations with so few nerve fibers. Human perception copes with this limitation by disregarding redundant features in objects and images. This is called 'redundancy' and is especially employed when viewing edges, curves, angles and corners. Redundancy enables humans to also imagine and translate shapes into significance for example, we can see a sleeping cat in the following shape.



Why does this matter? Redundancy is one of the causes of human misjudgment in estimating distance, edges (falling hazards) and speed. Redundancy plays a key part in visual differentiation eg. perception of change as in puzzle below). On site, this is why people can walk past hazards and not see them or why people misjudge spacial risks.

Further read: Dark and Bright Corners of the Mind, Scientific American Mind Issue Dec 2013, p. 20-22.

Competition

Enter your description There are more than 10 differences between picture 1 and picture 2 below. The first 5 entries that list more than 10 differences between the pictures will receive a free copy of Dr Long's second book: For the Love of Zero: Human Fallibility and Risk.

Send your list of 10 or more differences to admin@humandimensions.com

This should include, the time it took for you to get more than 10 differences.

You will be notified of your success. As per previous competitions, prizes seem to go within the first hour of the Newsletter launch.

Picture 1



Compare pictures and note the differences.

Picture 2

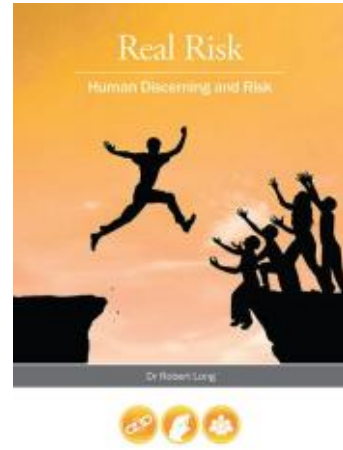


How long does it take to spot 10 or more differences?

News – Delayed Release of Book Three, Real Risk: Human Discerning and Risk

It was anticipated that the third book in the series on risk by Dr Long would be released before Christmas 2013 but this has now been delayed. Due to an exhaustive level of work and health reasons, Rob has decided to launch the book in February 2014. Keep your eyes out for a special launch Newsletter and Human Dymensions website change.

If you are interested in coming to a book launch in Canberra in February please indicate by email.



New Staff - Rob Sams



Welcome to Rob Sams who joins the Human Dymensions team.

Rob brings a wealth of experience to the team having worked with National and International organisations in risk, safety and organizational culture. Rob is currently enrolled in the Post Graduate program in the Social Psychology of Risk but holds other qualifications in risk, safety, auditing and environmental systems.

Rob has extensive experience in providing advisory, training and consultancy services to manufacturing, building and facilities, health, transport, automotive and sales/ marketing businesses. Rob also is a board member of Lifeline Newcastle and Hunter.

So we now have two Robs on the team just to confuse you. Rob's email address is robs@humandymensions.com

Rob is currently delivering the Human Dymensions PROACT Program to a large retail network.

Happy Christmas and New Year

Rob, associates and staff at Human Dymensions wish you a Happy Christmas of fun, celebration and meaning.

17th Century Le Nain Brothers – Nativity with the Torch



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