

Heading into the unknown: Everyday strategies for managing risk and uncertainty

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Within interdisciplinary risk research, strategies for managing risk and uncertainty based on cognitive rationality are seen as more effective than non-rational strategies, such as hope, belief, or avoidance. However this dichotomy between rational and irrational strategies neglects a whole range of everyday approaches to risk that are neither completely rational nor irrational as they may involve the use of prior knowledge and experience. These in between strategies include the use of emotion, trust, and intuition to make decisions, and they can be seen as complementing and overcoming some of the limitations of instrumental and calculative forms of risk and uncertainty management and therefore in combination they facilitate more effective control over the future. In late modern societies, individuals' decision-making has become increasingly important and problematic because the rising complexity and volatility of decision-making situations. Individuals have to make important or 'fateful' decisions in an almost reflex-like manner, without enough time or knowledge available.

Such decision-making requires increased trust, for example in the experts with appropriate knowledge and skills. The important aspect of trust is less its implicit or unconscious aspect but the underlying experience-based knowledge. Similar to intuition, trust refers to tacit knowledge and pre-conscious awareness of reality. Intuition seems close to the kind of embodied (or even innate) knowledge high risk takers use. Trust and intuition both involve feelings and emotion. Positive affect is associated with trust while intuition can be expressed in emotional terms, e.g. when individuals use the sense that 'it feels right to me' as a basis for action. While experts may prescribe cognitive-rational strategies as the most effective response to risk, if they do not acknowledge and recognise the importance and capacity of non-rational and in between approaches then it is likely that individuals will disregard expert advice or absorb and transform it within their own experiences about and responses to risk. The potential benefits of strategies combining different elements and approaches will be lost.

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