

## **Statement for Extreme Event Decision Making Workshop**

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All of the aspects of extreme events covered by the other participants are interesting and important, and I am looking forward to our discussion of each of them. It is a great topic, because so many psychological theories are implicated (e.g., how does extreme emotion and stress affect decision making?) and because it is motivating to feel as if our work has a focus outside the laboratory or survey. Sometimes it feels as if the topics of greatest political concern are the most difficult for us as social scientists to provide recommendations about, because the issues are so complex and the decision making field is so new. I am glad that we are going to take a stab at it anyway. It is gratifying to know that so many good minds are turning their attentions to this topic.

My research is relevant to extreme event decision making in several ways, but the most relevant (and pressing for me now) is predicting and understanding when and why people incorporate preventive measures into their everyday lives. Most of my papers have been concerned in one way or another with trade-offs between grander values such as morality and more pedestrian but enjoyable values such as having fun and saving money. I have found that the slightest reframing of the decision context can push people in one direction or another (e.g., Irwin, Slovic, Lichtenstein, and McClelland, 1993; Irwin, 1994; Irwin and Baron, in press; see Irwin and Baron, 2001 for a review). This is true even for people who say they have “protected values” (Baron and Spranca, 1997), that they would never sacrifice a particular value for another. They habitually do sacrifice these values against quality (e.g., workmanship) and price attributes, but more often in some contexts than others. Marketplace contexts, such as being asked to state the maximum they would be willing to pay for an item or policy, seems to reduce people’s willingness to worry about moral issues, in study after study. This finding anecdotally fits the common perception that products with moral attributes enjoy only modest marketplace success, even though in surveys people will indicate great interest in them.

How are these findings relevant to the workshop topic? The prevention of extreme events constitutes a moral decision, given you do not believe that you will be victimized by the event. Sadly, it is often the case that the people who caused an event (or did not prevent it) are not the ones who have to deal with it later. Not all environmental disasters can be prevented, of course, but their effects can usually be mitigated. The decision either to prevent or mitigate harm to others is an economic decision. Witness the disastrous effects of earthquakes in areas (e.g., rural India) where building codes were not enforced. The decision to require building codes, or to follow them voluntarily, is a decision to sacrifice money and convenience for the increased probability of others’ welfare.

It is likely that the decision to prevent harm to oneself, while not strictly a moral decision, shares some of the characteristics of moral/nonmoral tradeoffs. The choice to do what we ought to do as opposed to what we want to do is rampant in everyday life, and I

would argue underlies policy gaps that leave people vulnerable to extreme events. It is just too tempting to choose a tax cut over increased security in schools, to choose a large and comfortable automobile over harm to air quality that leads to global warming (and concomitant climate disasters), to support foreign policy that aids countries that can help us financially instead of those who are truly in physical need. And yet many of us would choose the safer “should” option if asked what we truly prefer. People are inconsistent, and that is what makes this research interesting and frustrating.

It would be wonderful if we could talk about some of these issues at a theoretical and policy level, to try to disentangle the inconsistencies in people’s decision making that can lead to less prevention than we might otherwise enjoy. Selfishly, I would also like to develop some research streams to help test some of these issues, expanding what we already know.

## References

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