

Comments for Extreme Event Decision Making Workshop

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Extreme events are easy to imagine in the abstract, but sometimes hard to imagine up close. Who wants to imagine them anyway? They are upsetting, frightening, even horrifying. And it is easy to think, “Oh, that will never happen to me.” They occur so rarely, and when they do happen, each one somehow seems unique. How can decision making researchers contribute to the multi-disciplinary efforts to prepare for such events?

Research in judgment and decision making should be able shed light on individual and institutional incentives that motivate people to avoid such events or prepare for such events. What persuasion methods work best to convince people it is worthwhile preparing for such events? Research on stress, fear, panic, and time pressure should help guide plans of action during the occurrence of extreme events. That is, we should be able to avoid the problems that we know are likely to occur. Finally, research should be able provide insights about how people can learn from extreme events, once they have happened. What are the barriers to thoughtful analyses of past extreme events?

My own research in the last several years seems only weakly related to these topics. I have studied connections between anticipated emotions and choice, but the contexts I have investigated are much less intense. The scenarios I have studied do not involve stress, time pressure, panic, and fear. However, I can think of several research agendas that do seem to be more closely connected.

1. Effects of stress and time pressure on decision making (e.g., Hammond’s new book, edited volume by Svenson and Maule)

2. Effects of fear, panic, and uncertainty on decision making (Janis and Mann, Janis’s more recent books, Lerner & Keltner)

3. Accountability and decision making (e.g., Tetlock, Lerner & Tetlock)

4. Perceptions of risk (e.g., Slovic, Fischhoff, Lichtenstein)

5. Persuasion and attitude change (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo)

6. Group think (e.g. Janis)
7. Sunk costs (e.g., Arkes, Staw)
8. Hindsight biases (e.g. Fischhoff, Arkes, Einhorn, Hogarth)

Many of these topics are obviously difficult to investigate under laboratory conditions. It would be useful, however, to brainstorm about possible experimental analogs. Can one simulate situations that would lead to useful results? Furthermore, what are alternative methods of doing more 'high fidelity' research? How can decision making researchers work more closely with those involved in technology development?