ON RISK, ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

Risk Management (2008) 10, 153–155.
doi:10.1057/rm.2008.6

The issue of risks and how they are perceived by the public is becoming an increasingly central question tailoring business and economic activities, technology and innovation as well as social and political life. Therefore, the understanding of what underpins risky behaviour becomes an interdisciplinary area that is progressively growing in social sciences.

This special issue is the result of the Preference Elicitation Meeting that took place at the Universitat de Barcelona on 11 May 2007 and a subsequent call for papers on the broad issue of risk, attitudes and behaviour. The issue contains five selected contributions that portray key discussions and evidence within the discipline of risks research. More precisely, this journal issue will deal with the role of emotions, trust and affect on risk perception and attitude formation, along with the influence of structural approaches, measurement issues and the role of political anchoring as determining feeling on new technologies.

The first contribution of the special issue is by Vivianne H.M. Visschers and Michael Siegrist from ETH Zurich, who undertake the difficult task to review the literature of affect and trust in shaping risk perceptions and discuss risk management implications. They find that affect and trust appear to be important determinants of risk perception indicating that people's instantaneous responses matter for risk management.

The next paper is an original contribution by Lennart Sjöberg from Stockholm School of Economics, who investigates the underlying motivations underpinning attitudes to genetically modified (GM) food, and particularly whether experts reveal a different view than the public. Interestingly, experts were found to be much more positive about GM food than were members of the public. Furthermore, they find that paradoxically attitudes towards GM food are driven by people's views on nature, moral value of technology and epistemic trust.

The third contribution is a methodological and empirical contribution by Monserrat Costa-Font and José Maria Gil from the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya who draw upon evidence from the Eurobarometer 2002 to

test the reliability of a structural equation model to explain the acceptance of GM food in Spain. They find evidence supporting a structural association between behaviour, attitudes and purchase intentions. Interestingly, and consistently with Sjöberg's previous work, trust in science and government information source is potentially the key issue that determines further acceptance.

John Cairns, Wendy Adie and Liesl Osman from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical medicine and Aberdeen University provide both methodological and conceptual innovations. They use discrete choice experiment methods on divers and other offshore workers, to disentangle on the basis of the perceived likelihood that different scenarios have for an accident to happen. They find that among those relevant characteristics, the quality of workplace supervision was the most important single factor while the personality of the respondent was a relatively minor determinant of their responses.

Finally, the special issue contains a paper written by myself, Caroline Rudisill and Elias Mossialos from the London School of Economics and Political Science dealing with the influence of political affiliation on feelings and interest on GM food. Our findings suggest that the GM debate is anchored in politics as individuals rely on their political party to mould perceptions about GM food. Interestingly, only specific party affiliation rather than voting alone was significant. Another important result is that once relevant covariates were controlled for, feelings about GM food did not appear to be driven by education or information, which indicates that more information might not necessarily change people's feeling about GM food.

All in all, these five contributions pay special attention to the formation of risks perceptions and attitudes as fuelling risk-related behaviour. Especially, some results put together point towards the need of individualizing each risk to understand its formation. Indeed, these studies reveal that differences in trust, affection and in general attitudes might be responsible for marked idiosyncratic effects in how risks are perceived. Furthermore, these contributions suggest that there is a large scope for methodological improvement on how best to elicit risk perceptions and in identifying the exact decision-making process that explains behaviour. The latter is especially the case when issues at stake are largely politicized and people are insufficiently informed.

Last but not least, I would like to thank all those who helped in this endeavour including Elisenda Paluzie, Adam Oliver and Anna Garcia, as well as all the participants for their comments and enthusiasm; especially Daniel Read, Peter Wiedemann, Jorge Araña, Mireia Jofre-Bonet, Jose Luis Quevedo and Carmelo Leon, along with those who have contributed with a paper in this special issue. We are especially thankful to all those who helped in the peer review process, including Lennart Sjöberg, Michael Siegrist, Yaniv Hanoach, Montserrat Costa-Font and John Cairns along with the *Risk Management* editor Dominic Elliott for being so enthusiastic about this special issue. Finally, we are grateful to the funds from Generalitat de Catalunya form

the Xarxa de Referència en R+D+i en Economia i Polítiques Públiques in 2007 in financing the seminar.

Hope you have as much fun reading this volume, as I had throughout this whole project.

Joan Costa-Font
European Institute & LSE Health,
London School of Economics and Political Science,
London, UK