



## NON-RATIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING RISK PERCEPTION

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*david@risk-doctor.com*

Dr Paul Slovic from Decision Research Inc (US) is a leading researcher in the field of risk psychology, and has produced some valuable insights to help us understand how and why we feel the way we do towards risk. Although rational assessment is a significant contributor to how risky we believe a situation to be, there are also many non-rational factors which influence our perception of risk. Slovic lists the following:

1. **Dread.** If the outcome of a particular risk is something we imagine to be terrible, painful or fearful, our perception of the risk is heightened. For example anything that might cause cancer is seen as a high risk because the thought of cancer evokes fear.
2. **Control.** Where we believe we have control, we perceive risk as lower. Travelling by car is a clear example – we feel less comfortable as a passenger than if we are driving.
3. **Natural vs man-made.** Hazards resulting from human actions are seen as more risky than natural hazards. Nuclear power stations appear to be more risky than severe weather or natural disasters.
4. **Choice.** If I have some choice over my exposure to a risk, then it seems lower than if I am exposed involuntarily. For example radiation from cell-phone transmitters gets more public attention and action than exposure to solar radiation when sunbathing on holiday.
5. **Children.** Any risk that affects children is perceived as worse than one which only affects adults. Playground safety gets more attention than road safety.
6. **Novelty.** New risks are seen as being higher than ones we have grown used to seeing (genetically modified food is viewed as more risky than pesticides). And continued exposure to the same risk results in it being seen as less risky .
7. **Publicity.** If a risk has a high profile in the media or public consciousness, it will be perceived as being more risky. Terrorism is an obvious current example.
8. **Proximity.** If I could be a victim, the importance of the risk seems higher than it really is. For example I may worry about post-operative complications after surgery even if the hospital or surgeon have a good track record.
9. **Risk-benefit trade-off.** If exposure to a risk could also result in a perceived benefit as well as a threat, the risk is discounted. Key examples include smoking and drink-driving.
10. **Trust.** Where protection from a risk is offered from a trusted party, the risk is perceived as lower, but lack of trust makes the risk seem bigger. For example public trust in government or the police can influence the perceived level of threat from terrorism.

These non-rational factors have significant effects on how well risk is assessed and managed. Although Slovic's work relates to public perceptions of risk within society, his conclusions apply equally well to assessment of business and project risks. If we remain unaware of these factors, we are likely to make wrong judgements about how important a risk is, and our responses will be inappropriate. Recognising their existence can lead to more effective risk processes, more realistic risk communication, and better outcomes.