

Not sure? Don't sweat it: Embrace Uncertainty

Governments and other large organisations should put more resources into ways of dealing with the unknown, according to experts pioneering a new approach to understanding and managing uncertainty.

In a new interdisciplinary study, the ANU researchers argue that uncertainty is central to human life and decision making – from planning for climate change to making decisions about daily activities.

“There are many different types of uncertainty, but our education and training equip us poorly to understand and deal with them,” argues Professor Gabriele Bammer from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at ANU. “We cannot begin to plan for a full range of contingencies because there are so many things we do not know about effectively managing uncertainty.

“For example, some uncertainties around terrorist attacks can be tackled with probability theory and statistics. But those methods are of no use in meeting the challenges that face the intelligence community, whose uncertainties involve either gaps in information, an overload of information, or conflicting accounts.”

In their new book *Uncertainty and Risk*, Bammer and Professor Michael Smithson from the School of Psychology at ANU propose a new science of integration and implementation that can pull together different approaches to uncertainty from multiple disciplines. They asked 20 experts from various fields to provide perspectives on uncertainty, with a particular focus on the problems of environmental management, communicable diseases or illicit drugs.

The researchers say this broadly informed and integrated approach to uncertainty should foster a shift in the way we think about the unknown and associated risks. “Uncertainty is generally viewed as negative, something to eliminate,” Professor Smithson says. “But doing so ignores the fact that uncertainty underpins many positive things, such as the concept of freedom. For instance, people create and maintain uncertainty to add value, such as the surprise value in a gift or the entertainment value in not knowing how a film or novel is going to end.”

Professor Smithson, who has written extensively on uncertainty, says that people and organisations use uncertainty to achieve worthwhile goals. “Uncertainty is essential for creativity and entrepreneurship, and it’s at the heart of various kinds of social capital such as trust, privacy, and politeness. A truly sophisticated perspective on uncertainty recognises its positive as well as its negative side.”

Source: Australian National University

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